

YOUR
LETTERS

MAILBOX

This month, a letter in defence of Windows Vista, a valid rant about fair-usage policies – plus we explain why you should take your kitchen scales with you when buying a new PSU

★ **Star letter** Vista will be worth the upgrade

Over the past few months, you have published a few letters predicting that Windows Vista won't be worth

upgrading to. The reason those readers believe Vista is just a pretty face is because that is basically what your reviewer said. However, there is a lot of stuff under the hood that will make Windows Vista a worthwhile upgrade.

For a start, it will handle heaps better, pardon the pun. Software developers use 'heaps' to handle memory allocation, and Vista's heap system is more efficient than Windows XP's. This means that people who write software will find life easier and that translates to faster software for us.

There are a lot of cool security features, too, and I'm not talking about Microsoft's anti-virus software. I don't think that's being included anyway – at least, not in a default installation. The kernel has been rewritten to stop viruses and other malware from affecting the system at its core. What's more, Microsoft has taken steps to encourage us to use good anti-virus software.

Anti-virus programs really slow up computers, particularly when you're doing disk-intensive work. To stop this, Vista will ensure that your security software (including third-party utilities) won't get in the way when you're working on large files. This is due to a new I/O system that lets the computer handle process priorities more intelligently.

Finally, Windows Vista will handle drivers differently from previous versions. Windows XP uses many drivers at the kernel level, which means that if one driver crashes, the whole system can crash. Windows Vista runs many of these drivers at user level, rather than at system level. If a rubbish driver goes down, the system should still keep running.

These functions aren't as exciting to look at as a nice glassy interface, but at least there is some tangible evidence that Windows will be faster, more

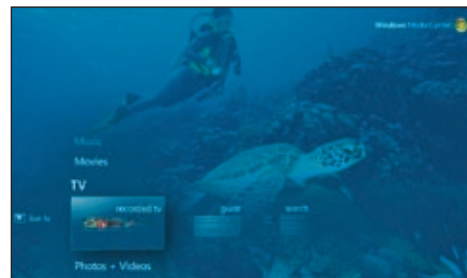
reliable and more secure than ever before. Based on the track record of previous versions of Windows, I personally cannot wait to upgrade.

Gareth Evans

You should never judge a book by its cover, and potential upgraders to Windows Vista would do well to look beneath the attractive veneer. What they will see there depends on their level of technical understanding, much like looking under the bonnet of a broken-down car.

Performance and stability are clearly important features in an operating system, but they are hard to evaluate, even if you have a computer lab at your disposal. Testing how easy something is to use is much easier. That doesn't mean we'll shirk our responsibilities when Windows Vista is eventually launched in all its versions. We will run extensive performance tests on every Windows Vista PC we review.

To add to your list of new Windows features, we can reveal that the networking system has been rewritten to increase download speeds, which is something from which many people will benefit. There will also be Media Center-style features, as announced by Microsoft this month. See *News*, page 257, for more information.



▲ Windows Vista will incorporate Media Center-style features such as the ability to record TV

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THE OUTER LIMITS



Is it not time that the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) started clamping down on ISPs that advertise unlimited internet access but include the words "subject to our fair-usage policy"? These companies are offering a restricted package.

My sister recently saw such an advert and signed up to a 2Mbit/s service. Within a week she was contacted by the ISP, which claimed that she was breaching the fair-usage code and, if the situation did not change, she would be put on a restricted bandwidth. Amazed at this, my sister asked for figures and it seems that the peak times are 6pm to 11pm, during which customers are asked to restrict their internet use.

Within a week, my sister found that her account had been restricted. Outraged at paying £18 a month for a restricted service, she contacted customer services and was told that the meters showed constant activity of at least four hours a night during the peak times, and this was not acceptable.

With two children, one notebook and one computer on the go, you would not expect four hours a night to be too much to expect for £18 a month. Needless to say, she cancelled the contract and is now with my ISP, which has guaranteed her unlimited usage.

But no action is being taken by watchdogs over this blatantly misleading advertising. It seems that as long as the words "fair usage" are included in the



contract, however small the print, they are acting legally. We are being taken for a ride.

J Shingler

A few ISPs make a selling point out of their unlimited services, guaranteeing genuinely unmetered internet access. Your sister's ISP, Tiscali, advertises its £17.99 per month 2Mbit/s broadband service as "unlimited". But what does that mean? We all have different definitions.

We spoke to the ASA, which said that it doesn't handle advertising published on a company's own website. It considers this to be editorial, and consumers should approach Trading Standards if they believe that the business is operating a scam. The ASA does handle adverts printed in magazines such as *Shopper*, though.

When we compared a printed Tiscali advert with the online version, we found that the company had worded its magazine advert with more detail. Instead of offering "unlimited" access, it offers "unlimited time online". The difference is subtle but important. You can be connected to the internet 24 hours a day, downloading very little, and the ISP would be happy. However, connect for a few hours and download gigabytes of data during the evening and you'll fall foul of the fair-use policy.

The ASA's view on fair-use policies is documented at www.cap.org.uk. In short, "the ASA has ruled that to use unqualified claims such as 'unlimited' is acceptable if a fair-use policy exists; but only if (a) the existence of a fair-use policy is stated in the ad and (b) the fair-use policy is fair and reasonable, which means it must exclude only atypical users".

Even though Tiscali's web advert doesn't fall under the ASA's remit, it still complies with the ruling, providing a clear link to a well-written fair-use policy. Whether or not most potential subscribers will read this is debatable, but the industry has shown that it considers this type of advertising to be fair. The magazine advert also includes a reference to the fair-use policy.

Tiscali's policy says that "a very small number of customers use peer-to-peer or file-sharing software, which constantly sends and receives video and other very large files, throughout the day. This type of activity uses a lot of bandwidth and can significantly reduce the speed at which other customers can access the internet during peak hours. Approximately one per cent of customers use more than 30 per cent of the available bandwidth during peak hours. We don't believe this is fair to the vast majority of our customers."

Those who intend to use the internet heavily during the evening, downloading large files regularly, will find such services inappropriate. Alternatives exist and, when choosing a broadband product, as with subscribing to any long-term service, it is important to read the small print. The devil is in the detail.

NO NET GAINS

✉ With the constant threat of virus attacks and, more importantly these days, identity theft, we are urged to take responsibility for keeping our virus and privacy software up to date. I am upgrading my old PC and have decided to take the ultimate security measure and not connect my new PC to the internet. My old PC is perfectly usable so I am



▲ Many large companies offer the option to activate products over the phone

going to use this for internet and email, and add protection software to it.

My concern is with the growing trend of software companies that require their software to be activated online during installation. Will that force people such as me to compromise our security if we want new software? Will I be able to tell if a product needs online activation from the box? Are there any other ways to activate software that are not online?

Mrs Brice

Refusing to connect a computer to the internet is your right. It's hard to hack a PC that's not connected to the internet and, if you don't need it to be, why expose your computer to the risk of attack? Fortunately, although many programs have online activation, there are usually ways around it.

That's not to say that there are legitimate ways to avoid activating the product, but companies such as Symantec and Microsoft will allow you to authorise your new purchase over the phone if necessary. The process is sometimes inconvenient, but it allows you to keep the computer offline.

The software that we've seen generally has a notice on the box that says something along the lines of 'product activation technology is included', or 'this product uses technological measures for copy protection'.

In some cases, such as with anti-virus software, you need internet access to get updates. However, you can usually register products using another PC with internet access. In these cases you'll need to go through the onerous process of copying long registration keys on to a piece of paper and then typing them out again into the browser of your internet PC.

We can't predict that every company will provide activation services for people who don't want to use the internet, but large companies wanting to keep their users happy are likely to maintain a telephone-activation option for some time to come.

SPACE EVADER

✉ I read with interest your feature 'Join the New Dot Com Boom' (*Shopper* April 2006). Although it spent quite some time telling us how the last boom went wrong (I suppose this was necessary and, of course, it fills space), the advice about starting a new online business was interesting if a bit sketchy. One point I feel must be raised is where you say "not declaring extra income can have serious consequences. The Inland Revenue takes tax avoidance very seriously."

Well, this may be true but tax avoidance is perfectly legal, even if the Revenue does gnash its collective teeth about it. Tax avoidance is defined as "the minimisation of tax due to the government in strict accordance with the allowances built into the taxation system" and "a legal planned strategy to pay the least amount of tax possible". Tax evasion, by contrast, is a criminal offence and is defined as "the general term for efforts by individuals, firms, trusts and other entities to evade the payment of taxes by breaking the law". To be flippant, the difference between the two is generally about five years.

If you're going to give advice on tax matters, get it right. This one point calls the whole article into question. After all, if the writer can make such a fundamental error, what are the chances of other mistakes being present?

Steve Dempster

Our slip was in writing "tax avoidance" rather "tax evasion" which, as you rightly point out, are significantly different things. We wouldn't expect reasonable, tax-savvy readers to write off the entire article due to one syntactical error, though.

The feature also included historical analysis detailing what went wrong with many online businesses in the late 90s, as well as including some inspirational anecdotes and general advice about operating an online business.

Readers who enjoyed the feature and are interested in starting their own online business, either by expanding an existing one or creating a

WRITE IN AND WIN!

Adobe has kindly agreed to give a bundle of its popular Photoshop Elements and Premiere Elements software to this month's star letter writer, furnishing Gareth with a powerful graphics program familiar to professional graphic designers, as well as the top-notch video-editing package Premiere Elements 2.0. Photoshop Elements 4.0 enables you to edit and enhance your digital photos easily and effectively, while Premiere Elements makes it simple to edit your own home movies like a pro.



PLUS!

Every letter-writer also receives a *Computer Shopper* mug





start-up, should be overjoyed with the new and regular *Business Help* section on page 242. This month we explain how an existing business can begin selling online. Our solutions range from those that cost next to nothing right up to more advanced techniques that will help build an automated internet company.

A WEIGHTY PROBLEM

 On my most recent PC upgrade cycle I decided to do a big overhaul and buy a new motherboard and processor. Realising that my new system would be drawing a lot of power, I popped down to my local computer fair and bought what seemed like a great power supply. It was a branded (though I had never heard of the brand) '440W guaranteed' model that also had a pretty blue light to match my PC's lighting scheme.

On lifting one of these at the stall, I became concerned. I remembered *Shopper's* excellent advice in *Helpfile* regarding power supplies that said the heavier it is, the better. This supply was very light. I asked the guy at the stand about this and he said that its lack of weight was down to an aluminium enclosure and that I shouldn't worry. A neighbouring shopper (and I am sure this was not a setup) even recommended the supply personally, saying he had bought one and it worked beautifully. So I parted with £40.

I installed the supply and booted up, but immediately things seemed against me, with Windows crashing during installation. Even after eventually installing everything, the system was seriously unstable and would crash regularly. I couldn't even listen to music without something dying.

Some other weird things started happening, too. For example, when watching TV, if a hard disk was accessed, the screen became covered in white and grey flashes that got worse as the hard disk access increased.

Then, about a week later, my pride and joy just fizzled out. I returned to the computer fair and exchanged my super aluminium power supply. The replacement was just as bad and in the end I got my money back.

I bought a Jeantech power supply from PC World. The supply was rated at a guaranteed 500W, had SATA connections, was fully ATX 2.0-compliant and was quiet, as it had a 120mm fan, and it had a blue light. Best of all, it weighed a ton. I parted with another £60.

The change in my system was incredible. The crashing cut out completely, with an end to the weird TV blips. I never realised the quality of the power supply was so important. It can mean the difference between high-performance happiness and blue-screen hell.

Simon Grimshaw

A lesson well learned, Simon. Power supplies are possibly the most boring part of a PC, whether they are pumping out blue light or not, but they are also incredibly important. And, in one of those strange-but-true rules that apply to computers, the heavier the supply the better. Simon has a pretty good memory, because we covered this in *Helpfile*, *Shopper* June 2005.

We said "a rough and ready test of the power supply requires a set of kitchen scales. Weigh the supply; if it is a standard 300W ATX supply and weighs less than 1.4kg it is likely to be poorly made and therefore suspect. A good-quality 400W supply should weigh around 1.8kg."

There is more information on the relationship between power supply quality and weight at www.directron.com/psu.html. This includes some graphs showing results for power supplies running at between 300W and 600W, and weighing between around 1kg and nearly 3kg.

DON'T BE A MUG

 Last month it emerged that you sometimes get duplicate letters, copies of which have also been sent to other magazines. You might like to know that the person you singled out also had his letter published in *PC Pro* and won the star prize, but I'm not one to tell tales.

The reason I, a properly loyal *Shopper* reader, am writing is to suggest what you should do when you uncover such duplicity. Contact the writer and inform them that they have won an additional prize and invite them to your offices. Ask them to bring their beloved *Shopper* mug for a photo shoot. Then, when they arrive, confiscate the mug.

I don't know how available tar and feathers are in London, but I for one would pay good money to witness such a public humiliation.

R Bloom

Thanks for the advice. Harsh but fair, we think. Let this be a warning to all letter writers. We'll be watching out for similar letters in other magazines and if we see any, all *Shopper* readers are invited to the flogging. *Shopper* is a jealous mistress.

Incidentally, this is officially your last warning: if you continue to send in letters without including your postal address, you'll miss out on your mug altogether. 

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